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The Significance of World War One in Jan Patočka's Philosophy

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"He said nothing at all. One man's feeling is not always equal to all life is. Sometimes it's not equal to anything much at all." (Flanagan 1994, p.2)

-Richard Flanagan, *The Narrow Road to the Deep North*

In Jan Patočka's philosophy of history World War One stands out as an event that represents both a crisis point for Europe, and an opportunity to establish a new mythology. This mythology is based on the sacrificial action of the soldiers at the front line of trench war in World War One. Through emulating the example set by these soldiers, Patočka in his late work proposes, a redemptive force emerges through which Europe can recover the missing awareness of a more full meaning of life (and death). This chapter explores the significance of World War One in Patočka's late thought and offers a thorough explanation and critique of Patočka's mythologizing of the war. I will pay particular attention to Patočka's reading of Pierre Teilhard de Chardin and Ernst Jünger, who explicitly cites as sources for his view of soldier's sacrifice in his *Heretical Essays*.¹ These influences lead to a highly, and some would argue an overly romanticized view of the role of sacrifice in social change. I will instead argue for a more ambiguous approach to sacrifice, especially the sacrifice of the First World War soldier.

Patočka frames his philosophy of history around a relationship between appearing and concealment (Patočka 1996, p.4). The world appears to us, and then a framework for understanding, such as a mythic, or scientific, or cultural framework grasps the world. Hence any appearance of the world for a human being is a complex interplay between what is hidden and what shows itself. What does not show itself, whether that is because of not being perceived, or by not being accessible to the framework employed to understand the appearance, is in relationship with the appearance of the thing.

For Patočka the particular trait of human nature is that consciousness is openness to the world. That is, as Martin Heidegger had also argued, we are something that the world appears to (Patočka 1996). Presenting itself to every human, there is an open region which is accessible to them in their particular time and place. The epoch that a person is thrown into constitutes their open region which determines what is uncovered from concealment. So the world is structured as an appearance in an epoch, in a manner entirely different from another epoch. For Patočka, the epoch and the structure of appearance are cultivated through various forces such as myth, religion, art, and (interestingly) sacrifice (Patočka 1996, p.9). The open region is under constant cultivation. We find ever new historical worlds through the long and drawn out flows of these forces of cultivation

¹ Pierre Teilhard de Chardin (1881-1995) was a Jesuit theologian who wrote on palaeontology and evolutionary theory, and attempted to reconcile these sciences with his Christianity. Ernst Jünger (1895-1998) was a German thinker and writer whose memories from his days as a front-line soldier in the First World War heavily informed his later writings.

(Patočka 1996). As we will see shortly, for Patočka, World War One is an event which allows a mythology to push the open region of this epoch along in its process of cultivation. It is a two-edged sword since, on the one hand, the war represents the failings of the twentieth century and the preceding path of modern history. On the other hand, the war represents an opportunity to rethink myth and sacrifice in order to renourish the cultivation of the open region.

That the open region is determined and also being determined suggests that humans are not the center of the world or what the world exists to appear to. We shape ourselves to try to grasp the world. The world transcends the human. We find our place in the world by reference to this transcendence. We have to come to accept our place in the world (Patočka 1996, p.12-14). Patočka, as he is writing a philosophy of history, engages in analysis of myths from early civilization to show how humans originally came to understand their place in the world and the appearance of the world. For Patočka, early myths from Babylonia reveal an acceptance of finitude and the necessity of toil to keep that finitude at bay for a short time (Patočka 1996, p.17-18). Humans must work to make something that will outlive them. However, even though labor is necessary for survival it in no way guarantees it. The trope of the world catastrophe found in myths such as the flood in the epic of Gilgamesh show that our place in the world is precarious (Patočka 1996, p.18-19). Later in the *Heretical Essays*, Patočka finds World War One to be a similarly catastrophic event for revealing the precariousness of human life.

Human life, modernity, war and peace

For Patočka, that the human world is defined by our works which seek to reach beyond our finite situation reveals that our lives are in need of constant protection; however, the quasi-permanence of our works also show us that our actions do reach out beyond our finite world into a world of transcendence, even if this reach is only transient. Humans are constantly engaged in cultivating the open region of an epoch, despite the fact that our lives are finite. The meaning of our lives might lie in the transient reach beyond ourselves which are the actions and works which define the open region. Unfortunately, for Patočka, the movement of history has lost a lot of this understanding of pre-history. When Patočka later in the *Heretical Essays* comes to analyze modernity he diagnoses that we have lost an understanding of the importance of this transience. Modernity lives in the 'now' and does not see how our lives reach beyond themselves. I will return to this point later.

As pre-history develops a sense of the past through the reach beyond individual lives that works achieve, Patočka locates the meaning of human life in three distinct, yet inter-related movements. The first is the movement of acceptance, which is a fitting in to the world, a sinking of roots (Patočka 1996, p.29-30). The second movement is defense. This is the movement closely aligned with work. Defense is coupled with acceptance in so far as once one has found one's place in the world one works to preserve it, to limit it. Patočka calls defense the movement of self-surrender where the human necessarily sees their project as requiring them to work with and for others (Patočka 1996, 30-31). An important point to be carried into the analysis of World War One is that work, as a part of the second movement, is a burden. It is undertaken by necessity if one wants to live. The third movement is the movement of truth. This is the movement which moves between the sacred and the profane. It is the movement which reaches into the transcendent world and shakes off the particularities of a situation (Patočka 1996, p.33).

The three movements have been the subject of much scholarship (Findlay 2002, Tucker 2000). So this isn't the place to analyze them in focal depth. I will refer to Avazier Tucker's analysis, however,

to show the significance of these movements for Patočka's philosophy of history. Tucker argues that for Patočka the third movement leads to the discovery of the truth – to transcendence of the particulars and the recognition of the whole. This is the dimension where meaning and value dwell. (Tucker 2000) In other words, the first two movements are mechanisms for dealing with one's thrownness; whereas the third movement shows the individual's relationship to the whole. Thus, the third movement problematizes the first two movements by revealing the complexity of a thrown situation and by suggesting that one's particular situation is a part of a larger whole. That is to say, the third movement reveals that one's perception of one's life is different to the reality of one's life. Another way of explaining this conflict might be to say that the third movement unites the first two movements. It recognizes the importance of sinking roots but also recognizes the importance of defending ourselves against our finitude. Furthermore, in linking these two insights, the third movement recognizes that this defense and acceptance are surrounded by a precarious transience which doesn't diminish life but shows that life is something that reaches beyond itself. The finitude of life reveals life as something that reaches into the transcendence of the world – we are finite and involved in the cultivation of the open region.

Throughout the *Heretical Essays* Patočka describes life in terms of day and night (Patočka 1996). The day is the time of life – defense and acceptance. The night is the time of death, impermanence and precariousness. Truth then is the recognition that life is both the night and the day, not simply the day. Pre-historical man knew this. Historical man knows it better. For Patočka, history originally is a force which allows man to shake accepted meanings. History is a force which allows man to see where one has come from. The force of history thus allows the individual to better cultivate the open region through engagement with the force of history. For example, my engagement with a historical issue allows me to consider the possibilities inherent in that issue. History allows us to confront our finitude and actually do more than simply accept it. The recognition of that part of life which is characterized by the night, for historical man is a problem to be addressed. In order for this to happen mankind must take responsibility for its history. That is to say that cultivation of the open region in the age of history involves taking account of the created historical meanings which define an epoch and then acting within that account to initiate change (Patočka 1996, p.63).

In Patočka's analysis of modernity it is the concerns of the day which constitute the concerns of most citizens and the view of the importance of the night for a full view of human nature has been lost. Lubica Ucnik describes Patočka's critique of modernity as rooted in a mistrust of scientific modes of thinking which have come to predominate this epoch. She writes:

They are the outcome of the transformation of nature into a standing-reserve of energy to use as they see fit. Stripped of unpredictable and contingent elements, nature is transformed into a formal system written in mathematical symbols that can be potentially understood by everyone, everywhere, and at all times. (Ucnik 2011, p.190)

In Patočka's understanding, techno-scientific thinking, in taking away the precariousness from our understanding of life, has left life somewhat bereft of completeness. Modernity sees life as calculable and consequently notions of responsibility and taking account of history have been lost. For Patočka the consequence of a world that sees nature as something to be controlled and manipulated is that nature then requires wars in order to determine who has control over the world's resources and spaces (whether geographical or political) (Patočka 1996, p.124). If control of nature is a defining feature of the epoch then the concerns of the night to do with transcendence of

our finitude are replaced by the concerns of the day which ignore that finitude. For Patočka such a replacement has resulted in an understanding that power is the main driver of world events. The epoch of modern civilization is one which understands that force is the dominant feature of the age (Findlay 2002). Patočka writes that the twentieth century is defined by ideas, which have their bases in 19th century developments, that claim that there are no factual ideas and that meaning is more a contest of power than anything else (Patočka 1996, p.121). Enlightenment ideas that made for revolutionary wars have been lost and that if there is to be meaning in the world it is up to power to create it through struggle. For Patočka, World War One is thus a necessary outcome of the epoch and also the defining event of it (Patočka 1996, p.124).

The First World War is the decisive event in the history of the twentieth century. It determined its entire character. It was this war that demonstrated that the transformation of the world into a laboratory for releasing reserves of energy accumulated over billions of years can only be achieved by means of wars...

Why must the energetic transformation of the world take on the form of war? Because war, acute confrontation, is the most intensive means for the rapid release of accumulated forces... In this process humans as well as individual peoples serve merely as tools (Patočka 1996, 124-125).

For Patočka, the end of World War One did not see an end to conflict – the war continued by other means. Force remains, in his analysis, the driving concept of the epoch. The specific events of World War One, an inevitable outcome of the loss of history and the primacy of force, are but a symptom of the epoch. Hence, Patočka is adamant that force continues to shape the current human epoch, even if that war is now concealed, operating by stealth. In other words after the horrors of the First World War, and then the next World War following on its heels, modernity replaces war with violence with war using peace. (Patočka 1996, p.132-133). Edward Findlay explains Patočka's understanding of this shift:

In violent wars fought on behalf of ideology, these are the banners under which we fight and die. In the second half of the twentieth century, however, the rule of force and technology has been enforced primarily by peaceful means. Warfare transmutes itself into "acute" confrontation with the "conventions" of the past... The modern understanding of the individual as merely a role or a force merges in this century with an eschatology of peace, of a "better tomorrow." (Findlay 2002, p.137)

The world which has seen the horrors of war does not want those horrors to be repeated. However the lust for power has not been wiped clean from the epoch either. Hence the war continues in a demobilized form (Patočka 1996, p.132). Thus Patočka argues that post-war Europe mobilized millions of workers in a continued war of economics. For Patočka this continuation of war by other means is a ruse that is impossible to maintain. The conflict is only hidden, but not gone. Mobilization and demobilization are then two sides of the same coin and not opposites. Demobilization hides within it the mobilization of workers.

The horror of the war can be compared to the flood from Gilgamesh insofar as both represent a destruction of what humans cherish most deeply. As the war rampaged across Europe the

movements of acceptance and defense, that define individual consciousness, were again exposed as being precarious (as they were in pre-history myths such as Gilgamesh). For Patočka, the continuation of war is problematic because what has happened is that the will to force has continued through civilization's willing surrender to anyone who claims, with perceived authority, to be able to keep the horrible face of war away (Patočka 1996, p.126). We engage in war somewhat confusingly, for the sake of peace. We work for peace, we consume for peace, and we live for peace. In the face of the global catastrophe that is the war, humanity retreated into concerns of the day rather than facing up to the opportunity that presented itself to see the world as it really is.

The soldier and the night of the front

This opportunity is something that Patočka locates in the experience of the front line by the First World War trench soldier. The soldier originally is like everyone else – concerned with the things of the world and the day without a thought to the impermanence of life. It is actually the concerns of the day which bring the soldier to the front. The soldier sees themselves as occupying a certain role and that role needs to be carried out in fighting for peace. Yet the front line does not appear as a stage in which this role can be executed. The front, in so far as it is a terrible destruction of tradition, values, life, and meaning, is, for Patočka, “absurdity par excellence” (Patočka 1996, p.126). The soldier who experiences this terrible absurdity is marked by it forever. Hence the front is a transformative experience. For Patočka, although terrible, there is also in this experience a positivity which can give meaning to action and sacrifice in a world which has done its best to destroy such notions (Patočka 1996, p.126).

Through the experience of the front the soldier is forced into a drastic revaluation of values (Patočka 1996, p.124). The revaluation is a result of a strange freedom that the front gifts the soldier. The soldier, at the front, forgets the concerns of the day which led them to the front and instead sees the world transformed into horrible face of the front. The front was previously a part of the normal world of the day, however, in war, the front is a battle scarred place of death. Transformed through combat, the machine of the front turns the world into a space where the life of the participant reaches out into both the day and the night (Patočka 1996, p.130-131). All of the concerns which led to the soldier enlisting: concerns for peace, for future prosperity, for nationalism, all of these are left behind at the front as the front is a monstrously horrid place that destroys the things of the day. The first phase of the revaluation is a desire to destroy any world horrid enough to create the front (Patočka 1996, p.126). For Patočka, such a desire hints at something eschatological about the front line experience. However, it is possible that this is still Force co-opting the concerns of the day to continue the machine of war. Patočka argues that the truly positive experience of the front is found the realization by the soldier that they can be a sacrifice – sacrifice being one of the epoch-shaping forces of the twentieth century in his conception.

The front demands endurance of the soldier in the face of death (Patočka 1996, p.129). As an all-out assault on life, the front creates a distance in the soldier from a total attachment to life. The endurance and constant threat that the soldier undergoes are supposed to be for the concerns of the day – that is so that others (those at home) can have their time in the day. The soldier thus comes to see themselves as a sacrifice. I should note that in the immediate wake of the shooting of a soldier in Ottawa at the tomb of the unknown soldier, one much remarked upon response by Canadian cartoonist Bruce MacKinnon depicts the soldiers from the memorial stepping down to claim and nurse the body of the soldier who was shot. The response on twitter and in the

commentary upon the image is very telling of an attitude which supports Patočka's take on the public perception of a soldier's sacrifice. The below quotes are representative of a much larger response.

He joins the brave men and women fighting back against the darkness so that we don't have to. (Reddit 2014)

"It is a powerful depiction of how these are not just soldiers from the past but they are of present and, sadly, the future." (MacIntyre 2014)

Cirillo joins the brave legions who fell before him, standing on guard. (Brannen 2014)

I can summarize the sentiment of the comments on the cartoons in the following way: 'the soldier who was shot is a sacrifice in the war against those forces that would destroy our peace.' The fact that the soldier was not on guard in the sense of being on a well-defined front line, or even in a place of conflict is not relevant. After World War Two removed the demarcation of battle front and civilian area by turning every parcel of land into a conflict zone, war can be everywhere. The soldier is seen as a willing sacrifice for the peace of the day. For Patočka this is problematic. A soldier in the front line, under real and consciously perceived threat forgets the reasons that sent him there. Patočka writes that they would see that the individual life is not everything and that an individual life can sacrifice itself. Furthermore the soldier can understand that an individual life as a sacrifice can be a sacrifice in solidarity with other participants of the war. Referring to Pierre Teilhard de Chardin's writing on the war, Patočka writes that the soldier even understands that the enemy is in solidarity with them as participants and shared possessors of freedom from the day (Patočka 1996). Teilhard de Chardin had participated in the front, and through his experiences came to a somewhat mystical understanding of the role that war plays in bringing people together (King 1999, p.55). Teilhard de Chardin found that the front made him feel a unity with the natural order of things. The human world was not as separate from the natural world as it might usually appear to him. That is, he found in the front an experience of "creative union" with the world and with his fellow combatants. This led him to speculate that in the millions involved in the front were like a single organism with evolutionary potential (King 1999).

The evolutionary potential is what Patočka finds interesting. The war is place where the reason for war is lost and what remains is a unified mass of people with epoch-changing potential. What needs to be stressed however is that Teilhard de Chardin sees this creative union in a Christian eschatological sense. For him the universe is an evolution towards the spirit of Christ (King 1999, p.21). The millions involved in the war were involved in a "divine milieu" – a spiritual coming together (King 1999, p.21). The spiritual in Patočka might be considered as something like the 'sacred', which is not necessarily Christian; however the language of sacrifice which underpins the *Heretical Essays* has a Christian eschatological feel to it. Patočka does at heart advocate salvation through sacrifice. The mystical vision of World War One is heavily indebted to Teilhard de Chardin's religious thought. Patočka's conception of sacrifice as a contributor to the shaking and shaping the open region of an epoch is an idea that has roots in Teilhard de Chardin's eschatological vision of a world unified as a single organism and evolving towards spirit.

Hence, for Patočka, the reasons for attending the war and participating in the front are not the reasons for actually becoming a sacrifice while serving at the front. For Patočka, because of the freedom from the day and its total attachment to life and peace, the soldier is removed from the

machine of war even whilst participating in it (Patočka 1996, p.129). This means that the soldier in becoming a sacrifice, makes that meaningful in itself, because it is not for the sake of something else. That is, the soldier doesn't die for 'king and country' or some other abstract notion. They die because their life reaches out into death and demonstrates that life isn't necessarily for the things of life.

From Shaken to a new *Aristeia*? From Patočka to Jünger

The unfortunate occurrence for Patočka is that despite the playing out of the war, the twentieth century continued to be fascinated by force. Patočka writes that with the introduction of nuclear weapons to the Second World War, the world finds itself under constant threat. Under the threatening cloud of the prospective nuclear winter, the absolute threat to the day coerces people to act for the concerns of the day. This is the continuation of the war past its hot stage. Patočka writes:

Humanity is becoming a victim of the war already launched, that is, of peace and the day; peace, the day rely on death as the means of maximal human unfreedom, as shackles humans refuse to see but which is present as *vis a tergo*, as the terror that drives humans even into fire – death, chaining humans to life and rendering them most manipulable (Patočka 1996, p.133).

Despite the world being in a situation where armies of civilians are mobilized in a war for peace, surrendering their lives to those who promise peace, Patočka believes that the experience of the front line soldier can be replicated by those who step up to the contemporary front line and risk everything.

Referring describes a community of “shaken” people who are scorned and persecuted by their fellow community members for their refusal to live as a mobilized worker in a war of peace any longer. These shaken people are to replicate the soldier's example. This community would defy the pressures to retreat in to the everydayness which is mobilized by “Force's plan for peace” (Patočka 1996, p.134). Also this community understand that history is a conflict between life “chained by fear”, and life that has relinquished its everydayness in coming to terms with its finitude. This community speak warnings to the wider communities in which they live, even if those warnings come at a risk to their own life (Patočka 1996). The “shaken” can turn themselves into a sacrifice. Patočka even uses the Greek word *aristeia* to describe the sacrifice of the “shaken” (Patočka 1996, p.136). An *aristeia* is a moment in an epic where a hero confronts death. For Patočka the soldier and those who emulate their example act when it is appropriate and when their sacrifice can tear a hole in the open region. They can act as heroes.

The language of heroic acts is interesting in Patočka's understanding of World War Two. He admits to basing a large part of his analysis of the First World War soldier on the works of Teilhard de Chardin and Ernst Jünger. With the language of heroism it is clear that Patočka shares Jünger's glorifying of war. Jünger fought in the war earning numerous accolades for his participation. After the war he published his memoirs, diaries and thoughts on the present and future state of the world. It is clear that Jünger has a strong influence on Patočka's thinking, especially regarding the shaken and the heroic sacrifice of the front line soldier. So it is worthwhile bringing attention to Patočka's reading of Jünger.

Jünger's work that Patočka explicitly refers to in *The Heretical Essays* is *Der Arbeiter*, a work has yet to be translated into English because of a copyright block placed by the author himself. However, quite a lot can be gleaned if one first looks at Jünger's war memoirs *Storm of Steel*, and his work on dissent, *The Forest Passage*. *Storm of Steel* is full of references to the front line being a place where one felt that one was on the precipice of a great change in the world that depended on courage, endurance and a transcendence of concerns about everyday things. For example, in a strange passage Jünger writes about a brief home visit he was allowed to make during the war. He writes that on his way to return to the front, he noticed some women on their way to play tennis. The strangeness of seeing the women in civilian clothing and off to engage in a mundane activity such as sports does not cause Jünger to miss his previous life. Rather it seems to further galvanize his sense of the significance of his break with mundane reality through his life as a soldier. Clearly there is some link between Patočka's description of a freedom in the front and Jünger's reaction to his time of duty. To further illustrate this point consider the following passage:

The moment before the engagement was an unforgettable picture. In shell craters against the enemy line, which was still being forked over and over by the fire-storm, lay the battalions of attackers, clumped together by company. At the sight of the dammed-up masses of men, the breakthrough appeared certain to me. But did we have the strength and the stamina to splinter also the enemy reserves and rend them apart? I was confident. The decisive battle, the last charge was here. Here the fate of nations would be decided, what was at stake future of the world. I sensed the weight of the hour, and I think everyone felt the individual in them dissolve, and fear depart. (Jünger 2003, p.231)

Here the soldier is surrounded by risk. Previously the rain of bullets, mortar and artillery have been described as a constant barrage - a storm of steel. Jünger speaks of endurance in the face of this dangerous environment and has hope that through his endurance, in solidarity with the endurance of the others involved, that the fate of nations could be decided. This is not a moment of patriotism, but of something more world changing instead. There is a danger to this view that Patočka does not touch on. The fact that the soldier is not only being a sacrifice but also being the means through which many other soldiers are being sacrificed (killed) is a glaring omission in the Patočka's analysis of the war. Consider the following passage from Jünger's work, reflecting on moments very soon after the previously quoted segment:

In the midst of these masses that had risen up, one was still alone; the units were all mixed up. I had lost my men from sight; they had disappeared like a wave in the crashing surf... In my right hand I gripped my pistol, in my left, a bamboo riding crop... As we advanced, we were in the grips of a berserk rage. The overwhelming desire to kill lent wings to my stride. Rage squeezed bitter tears from my eyes.

The immense desire to destroy that overhung the battlefield precipitated a red mist in our brains. We called sobbing and stammering fragments of sentences to one another, and an impartial observer might have concluded that we were all ecstatically happy (Jünger 2003, p.232).

Through each successive edition of *Storm of Steel* Jünger has dampened down the explicit bloodlust and enjoyment of killing. Yet it is still here in this most recent edition. Jünger enjoyed being a soldier.

His moments of battle are filled with bloodlust and destruction. Patočka completely sidesteps the bloodlust of Jünger by using the Bergsonian language of Chardin to describe conflict as a mystical coming together. Here I would argue that there is a responsibility to be upfront about the violent reality of conflict. Even if we accept Chardin's description of a world coming together through conflict, there is a concrete reality of large-scale death which Patočka should not shrink from. At the very least we can say that the bloodlust of Jünger is a glaring omission from the *Heretical Essays*.

Crossing the front line, from Jünger to Wildred Owen

In Jünger's work on dissent, *The Forest Passage*, he writes about the significance of renouncing a fear of death and confronting and transcending all forces of control (Jünger 2013, p.41). For Jünger, taking the forest passage is renouncing one's attachment to the ordinary and everyday, and becoming what Jünger calls the forest rebel. The forest rebel is very similar to Patočka's "shaken," in that both are combatants against the cities and communities in which they live. A deeper study is required to tease out the exact debt Patočka has to Jünger's *The Forest Passage*; however the similarity is worth remarking on.

Jünger, like Patočka, also feeds into his work the language of catastrophe and the potential of catastrophe to recover a lost mythic understanding of life and the world (Jünger 2013, p.51). He writes that in leaving the world of the everyday behind and fronting up to the reality that death permeates all individual endeavors, the rebel finds themselves in the forest, Jünger's symbolic state of being where one is confronted by the totality of life. Jünger writes that the forest is a place of life (Jünger 2013, p.51). That means that the forest rebel acts for the whole of life rather than the individuated life of what Jünger calls the desert. Jünger's intention is to demonstrate the power that a seemingly insignificant person has in toppling a power. He claims that individuals can act heroically whether they are a Hercules or the shepherd David. The power of the individual comes from renouncing their fear of death and joining in a combat with the forces which blind one to the totality of life by stressing the importance of an individual life.

I find such a view dangerous. It is important work in attempting to theorize the voice of the powerless. However, the military jargon is surely dangerous in its romanticizing of conflict. The danger lies in what kind of actions can be justified by a view of the mythic power of sacrifice in conflict with the everyday world. The *Heretical Essays* provide little in the way of a normative drive to guide a potential sacrifice. There is an implicit understanding in Jünger and Patočka that the forest rebel or the shaken are to put themselves in conflict with established power structures; however, such conflict is intrinsic to the resistance efforts of people such as the Ottawa shooter. For Patočka the sacrificial victim makes their sacrifice meaningful in and through their sacrifice. I would hazard that Patočka did not intend to be read as supporting groups engaging in acts of terrorism. Yet I'm not sure that there is enough in his view to make this clear. With that in mind I am dubious as to exactly how effective sacrifice is as an epoch mover. Public perception of sacrifice is one thing, but actual epoch change is another. Jünger might have felt that he was changing the face of nations and Teilhard might have felt a part of a giant cell evolving towards divine union; however these are atypical experiences and recounting of war. I wonder if Patočka had read Wilfred Owen or Siegfried Sassoon, if his thoughts on sacrifice might not be different. At the very least we can say that sacrifice is ambivalent at best.

In his analysis of Patočka's philosophy of history, Avazier Tucker argues that Patočka laments a lack of military action by the Czechs in the twentieth century. Tucker claims that Patočka looks to

Germany as a model of forging a centralized identity through conflict and laments that the Czechs were more the playthings of other stronger nations (Tucker 2000, p.109). For Tucker, Patočka's decision to become a dissident and involve himself in Charter 77 was a conscious decision to step up to the contemporary front and confront his death (Tucker 2000, p.111). Whether this is true or not is a matter for speculation. Many commentators argue something similar and I do not challenge this interpretation. I am, however, left wondering whether if Patočka had spent time in analyzing the concrete result of stepping over the line – the tragic loss of so much life – if he might not have offered a more ambiguous understanding of sacrifice. For Jünger, in *Storm of Steel*, a close encounter with death is a moment of everything being in place. Once shot during an attack Jünger remarks that he felt that his life finally made sense. I wonder if this is the appropriate response. Wilfred Owen's poem 'Dulce et Decorum Est' describes walking behind a cart containing a soldier dying after inhaling mustard gas.

If in some smothering dreams you too could pace
 Behind the wagon that we flung him in,
 And watch the white eyes writhing in his face,
 His hanging face, like a devil's sick of sin;
 If you could hear, at every jolt, the blood
 Come gargling from the froth-corrupted lungs,
 Obscene as cancer, bitter as the cud
 Of vile, incurable sores on innocent tongues,
 My friend, you would not tell with such high zest
 To children ardent for some desperate glory,
 The old Lie; *Dulce et decorum est*
Pro patria mori. (Owen 2009)

Patočka's vision of conflict as a driver of great change and the heroic aspect of sacrifice might fall victim to the same public perception of the sacrifice of the soldier that he is seeking to avoid by casting the sacrifice as an act meaningful in itself. Perhaps one or two individuals find meaning in battle; however it would be a mistake to romanticize what could be a delusion as constituting a mythic experience for positive change in the world. In Owen's poem the soldier is dying not in some heroic moment, but slowly, as a victim of a horrible machine that used him despite whatever meaning he gave to his own actions.

If the war and its contrivers was indifferent to this soldier's sacrifice, and if this sacrifice was indeed used by them as a means of continuing war, then the soldier's personal sacrifice never counted for much. That would be the real meaning of "absurdity par excellence," with no prospect that it could base civilizational renewal.

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